

On Morality/Ethics

In this essay, I aim to consider Morality, and whether or not there exists a moral code which we are required to follow.

Is there actually a set right and wrong? Are morals fixed, or are they subjective? Either morals exist independently of humans, and involve a set list of what is right and what is wrong, or they can change, and can differ from person to person, society to society. The problem with the first idea is that, if it were actually the case, there shouldn't be any moral problems, because everything would already be set. Everyone would already know what is right and what is wrong. This is the problem with a fixed morality (deontological/ Kantian) system. Of course, there is a question of who decides what is right. Well, say I was to suppose that the theory behind this is that no one decides, there is just an intrinsic right and wrong. Killing is bad, curing diseases is good. The end. Now what do we have? A system that no one set that is supposed to tell us what to do. But why should it? Everything had to begin its existence. It seems that the commonly-accepted morals are products of evolution; either they developed in us over time for some unknown reason, or they were actually important for our survival as a species. It doesn't matter which. What matters is that this process of coming to be is insufficient for making them infallible. I want to deny this fixed moral system.

But aside from that, let's consider that perhaps someone did set the morals in our system. Who? It is evident from looking at the world that morals change through time and space.

In the past, for example, slavery was not frowned upon. Today is generally isn't seen as acceptable. So, moral values have changed. This seems to suggest it was unlikely one person set all morals, but we'll ignore it for now. What matters is: how did slavery suddenly become wrong? Surely slavery didn't one day suddenly stop being morally right. Well, it is important first to note the distinction between morality and laws. Just because something becomes legal doesn't mean it is right, and vice versa. For example, it is legal to marry only one person, but it isn't necessarily immoral to marry many people. In fact, the law is designed by the rulers of a country, who really have no moral right to be there at all. So, that a government says it is wrong means absolutely nothing. I think we'd all like to think that a government couldn't just announce tomorrow that slavery is ok again. That wouldn't make it so.

Maybe morals were set by God, but, did he set them because they were right? Did he say Thou Shalt Not Kill because killing is intrinsically wrong? Well, I've already said things can't be intrinsically wrong. And even if they could be, what use morally is a God who merely passes along to us pre-defined rules he didn't make himself? Didn't he create everything? This seems to make little sense. A better answer might be the reverse, that these things are right/wrong BECAUSE God says so. But that has the same problem as with the government before. If God were to change his mind would right/wrong change? And furthermore, what gives God the right to decide? I didn't vote for him.

What we have here are two options. Either these things are flexible and are right only because God says so, or they are right without God, which makes no sense. This is what is known as the Euthyphro Dilemma, and comes from Plato's text

'Euthyphro'. Let us consider that things are right because God, or a government, or ANYONE, says so. What now? We are doing what we are told. This is not morality, this is obedience. That there exist punishments if we do the "wrong" thing makes it even worse. We are blindly doing what we are told because we fear punishment, or in some cases, because we were perhaps brainwashed by a regime. This is NOT morality. Ever. Morality involves making your own decision. Doing what you are told is the opposite of morality.

I would rather Person X kill Person Y because they thought it was the right thing to do than refrain from doing so but only because they were being controlled through fear of punishment. Of course, my preferences mean nothing.

Let us now consider another option. Morals are not fixed. They are flexible. Maybe morals are set by a society (Moral Relativism). Maybe they depend on your spacio-temporal location. As we can see for ourselves, different regions today have different morals. And different time periods have different morals. But, what constitutes a large enough group that can make its own morals? Well, I think any number of people would be entirely arbitrary.

It seems to me that the only plausible option to take is that we all make our own morals. This view, Moral Subjectivism, goes further than Relativism. Each individual makes their own system. Now, I don't think it is possible for someone to do something that they know is wrong, morally-speaking. You might be in a difficult situation, and you might make a certain choice. You might have to debate with yourself. It might be very hard to force yourself to do the right thing. This is merely an effect of societal brainwashing. You think you are doing the wrong thing according to the standards set by society. But whatever you ultimately do is necessarily right by your own system. It cannot fail to be right.

Now, this means no one ever does anything wrong. And this is true. Let's use the example everyone is probably thinking of: Hitler. He killed 6 million Jews. We want to say this was a very naughty thing to do. Well, consider this: what he did was indeed wrong, according to my moral system, and probably according to yours, and most people's for that matter. But it was right by his own moral code. Why would he have done it otherwise? Every time someone does something, they think they are doing the right thing. And this is sufficient to make it so.

In our society, if someone has a moral system which allows them to kill, then murdering people would be perfectly moral within their system. It just doesn't fit with everyone else's. Then there is a conflict of morality. Usually, in our society when someone's morals differ significantly from the norm, and that person acts on this, they are declared criminals or insane. But crime and insanity are both relative to a particular moral code. The person is doing something wrong by some people's standards, but not by their own. This is essentially tyranny of the majority.

But this does not mean we are powerless to prevent things we think are wrong. Imagine the following situation. Person X is holding a gun to Person Y with the intention of killing him. He is doing what he thinks is right, deep down. I see this take place, I stop the murder. I am doing what I think is right. There is no problem here at all. We are both acting morally, and are both doing the right thing within our own systems of morality.

Now, what I have tried to do is explain morality. What I have not done, is tell you what to do in any scenario. What is right and wrong for you must be worked out for

yourself. It is almost certainly a product of myriad factors, including: evolution, your upbringing, your education, indoctrination by society, your own free thinking and decision-making.

It does not matter what I would do in any given situation, because this would be worthless to anyone else. Of course, it is impossible to have a moral system come from nowhere; it is always a product of the things I just listed. This is unfortunate, but that's just the way things are. That doesn't make it good of course, but I don't see any alternative. Maybe I'm just closed-minded.

A penultimate note: what is interesting is that, within your own system, certain things will be fixed as right and wrong. You have a subjectively objective moral code. Of course, your morals may change as you have new experiences. But then you have simply changed the subjectively objective system slightly. This does not matter.

A final note: Rules and laws imposed by society or individuals are a problem. It may well be that those imposing the laws think they are doing the right thing, but we may also think we would be right to oppose them. The problem with rules is that they are inflexible. Everyone must conform to the same standards in all situations, end of discussion. Hopefully you now see that this is a problem. Does that mean I will break the rules? Well, like most people, I will break rules if I think there is a problem with the rule, but only when I doubt I'll get caught. Laws, far from being linked to morality, actually prohibit morality; this holds true regardless of whose laws they are: a parent's, a government's, a society's, a god's, even your own. Despite your subjectively objective system, I do not doubt you'll one day find yourself in a situation which requires a change in your rules. And that is the whole point of morality: morality is deciding for yourself generally or in a given situation what is the best thing to do, what is "right" or "wrong".

That is now to say I conform to the Horray/Boo system. No. It is not just that you happen to like or dislike murder that makes it right. You will believe that it is objectively wrong probably. But it is better to try to remove the objective aspect, and be purely subjective. In most situations you've faced, X is wrong, but in a certain scenario it might be right. How you decide on this does not matter. It might be intuition, or you might weigh things up like a Utilitarian* and consider how to get the best outcome (however you decide what that might be). All that matters for morality is that you do what you know is right, by your own standards, for that is what morality is: making up your own mind.

I think that suffices as a general account of morality. I hope it has been interesting, but I doubt it will be helpful.

*Utilitarianism: basic utilitarianism (Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill) is a measuring of pleasure and pain. Do what bring more pleasure than pain, or what brings the most pleasure. The aim is the greatest happiness for the greatest number. But this sounds a lot like tyranny of the majority to me. Everyone is equally a moral subject (one-one), but everyone is also equal to everyone else put together (one-many). This is why I would not, given the chance, kill Hitler. I do not think I could bring myself to do it.

There is another version, preference utilitarianism (read Practical Ethics by Peter Singer) which assigns preferences to persons. Everyone has a preference, and in certain situations mine might count as more than yours (say, if we both needed meds

and I was hurt more badly than you). Once again, it's all about weighing things up. In many respects, I agree with Singers conclusions, but not his method (most people agree with his method but not his conclusions for some odd reason). Doing what is right is about emotion, not mathematics. Of course, you may, within your subjective system, use utilitarianism to a certain degree, and often will in certain scenarios.

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